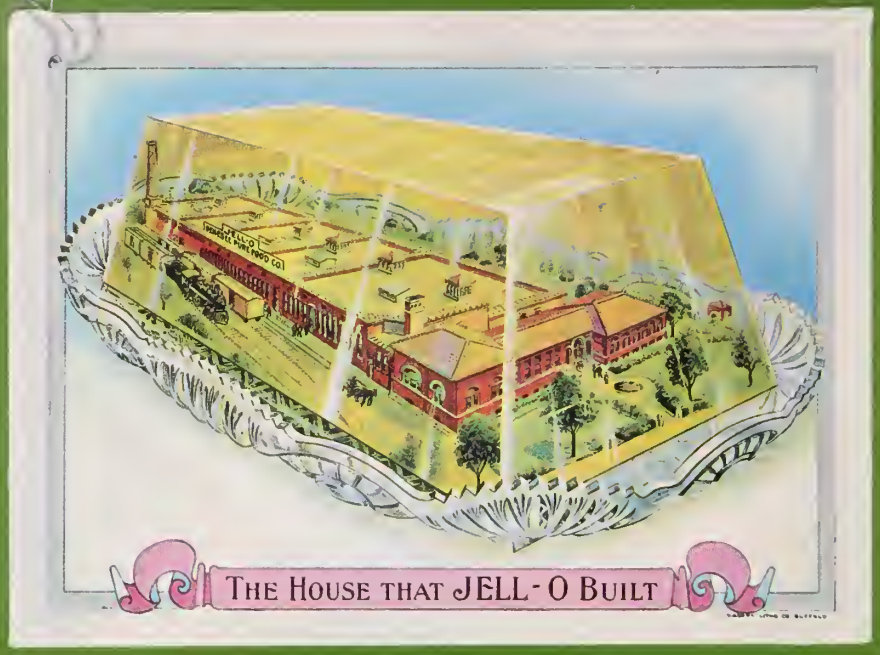
The World's Best Everything



The idea, so common in this day of smog control and urban renewal, that a big factory with belching smokestacks is something to be apologetic about would have been incomprehensible to most of our industrial grandfathers. To them their factories were things of beauty, the proudest symbols of the new America; and one of the most popular trade-card subjects was a full-blown rendering of "the works." Jell-O, pulling a neat metonymic switch, exhibited the factory in aspic; Bradley Fertilizer made no excuses for smelling up North Weymouth, Mass., and to Broadhead Mills their gorgeous plant seemed the perfect backdrop for a lightly tripping pretty girl.

"Our Factory"—Proud Symbol of an Era

OSWEGO STARCH FACTORY
1848
T. KINGSFORD & SON,
MANUFACTURERS.

BUY THE BROADHEAD
DRESS GOODS
MANUFACTURED BY
Wm Broadhead & Sons
JAMESTOWN N.Y.
BROADHEAD WORSTED MILLS

IN DANGER

So are you when you neglect a COLD.—YOU can be CURED by taking HILL'S CASCARA BROMIDE QUININE TABLETS.

CURES
COLDS, COUGHS
IN
24 HOURS.

CURES
LA GRIPPE
IN
3 DAYS

OR MONEY REFUNDED.

Trade cards, naturally, had to compete for attention just as the things they advertised had to compete for the market. Manufacturers strove for pictorial drama. Innocent Babes and Faithful Fidos were as popular then as now, and so were pretty girls. It would be a good bet that the artist who produced the stirring scene at left for Hill's Cascara Bromide Quinine had done many a similar lithograph to advertise the supercharged melodramas of the period. For Warner's Safe Yeast, a buxom lass was created whose bosom more than hinted at ebullient expansion.

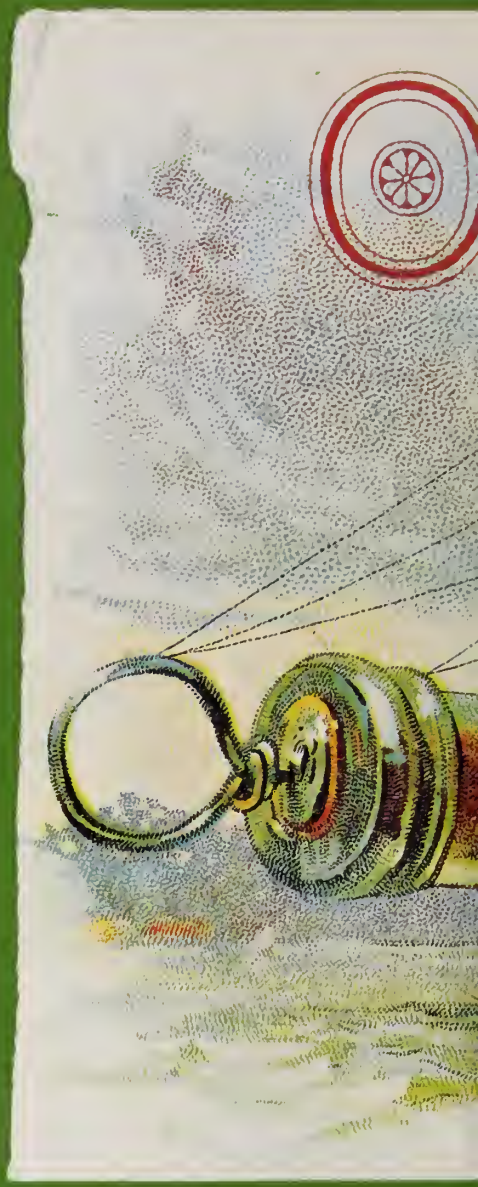
A Splash of Drama—and a Touch of S–x

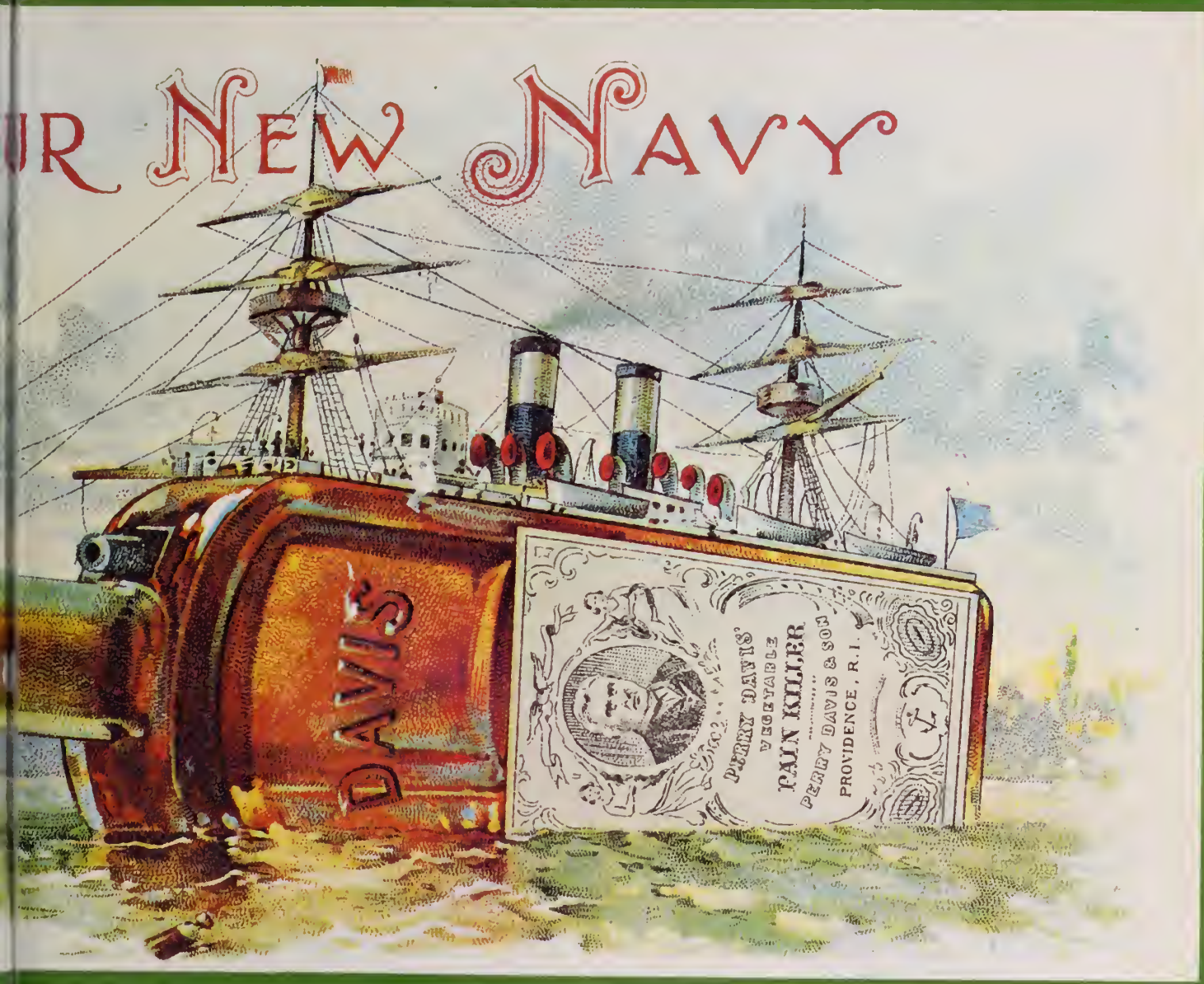
When a trade card's appeal was broad enough, it could be left blank and later imprinted with the name of any entrepreneur. To make the young lady in the bathtub stand up, turn the page.

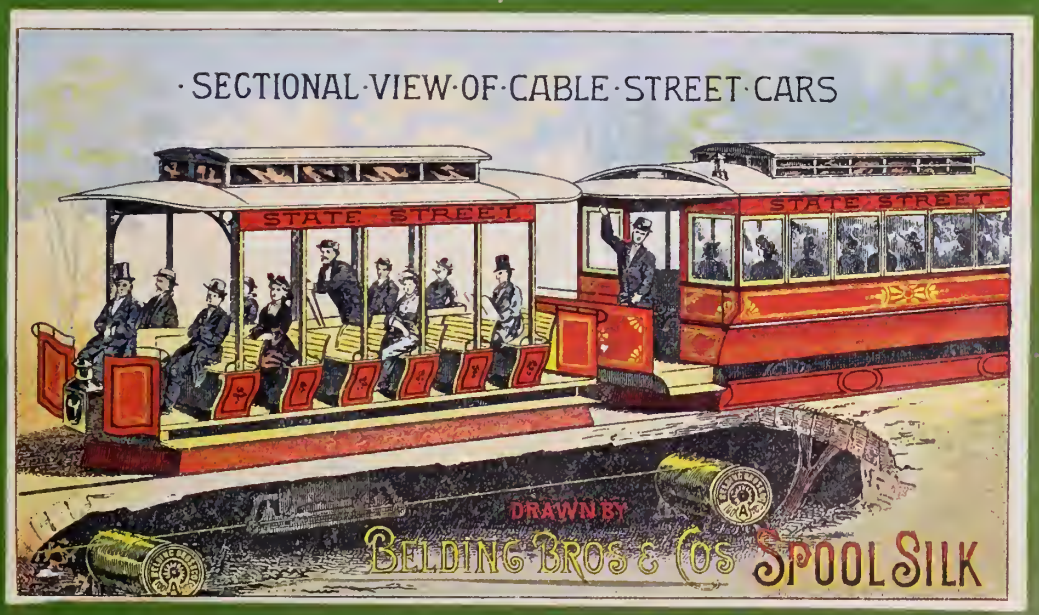
Quick to Board the Band Wagon

Innovations in transportation that caught the public imagination were quickly exploited by the trade-card virtuosos. When the country began to hear about San Francisco's cable cars (first installed in 1873), a bright spark at Belding Brothers saw that a "sectional view" of this intriguing means of locomotion could be used to imply that Belding's Spool Silk thread was more or less as strong as a steel cable. The daring introduction of steel warships in the eighties and nineties stirred someone working for Perry Davis & Son to substitute still another kind of hull: a bottle of Davis' Vegetable Pain Killer. (If the principal ingredient of this medication was that of most such nostrums, the mental association with the Navy may have sprung from the fact that grog, in one form or another, was issued to American sailors fairly often in those days.)

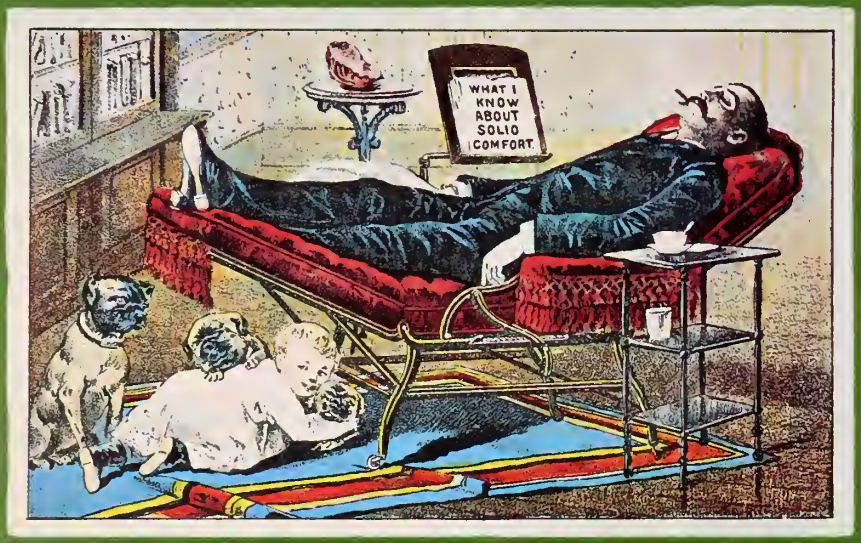
Below: the titillating card on the preceding page unfolded to this rather disappointing scene. But one could always have a beer.




UR NEW NAVY
DAVIS
PERRY DAVIS'
VEGETABLE
PAIN KILLER
PERRY DAVIS & SON
PROVIDENCE, R.I.

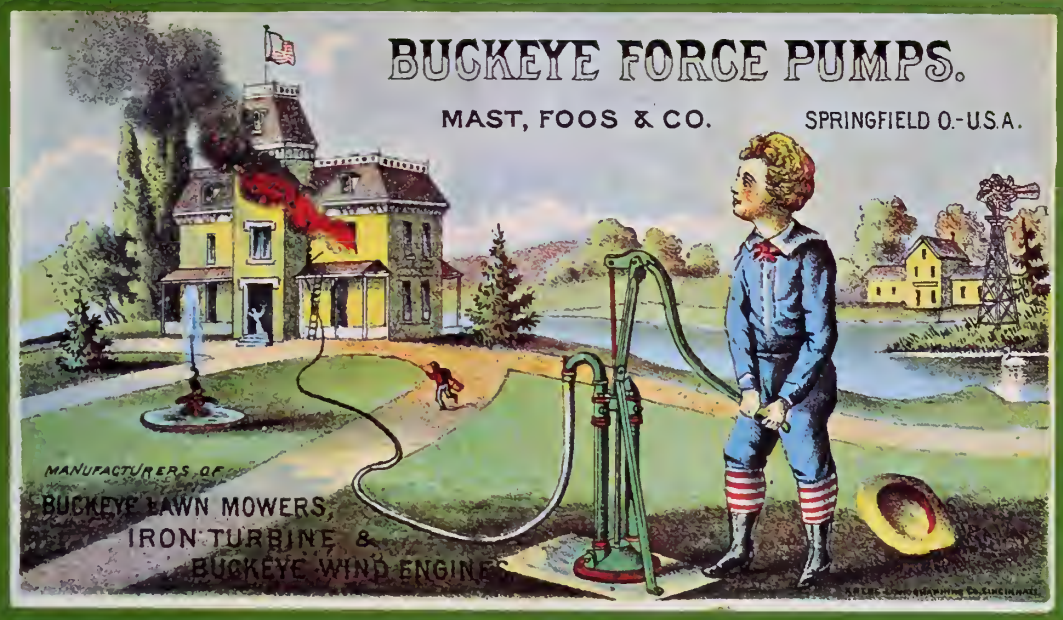

SECTIONAL VIEW OF CABLE STREET CARS
STATE STREET
STATE STREET
DRAWN BY
BELDING BROS & CO'S SPOOL SILK

Although the colossal day of plastics and electronics was still far in the future when trade cards flourished, the application of empirical knowledge to practical matters was in full swing to answer the growing demand for creature comforts. The Marks Adjustable Chair suggested that some of the best hours in one's library might be spent in horizontal reflection on the works of contemporary masters; it was obvious that operating the Fort Wayne Improved Western Washer was child's play; courtship hung in the balance over the purchase of a "Domestic" sewing machine "with new wood work and attachments"; and the virtues of Rising Sun Stove Polish were brilliantly clear to the mistress if not to the maid and the delivery boy. As for Buckeye Force Pumps, they might not quite put out the fire, but they gave you the satisfaction of knowing that if your house burned down it was not for want of the latest equipment, while the Andrews' Gem Folding Bed converted into a fake armoire so airtight that if anyone happened to get closed up inside, your guests would never know the difference.



"...Not another comfort like to this..."

—Shakespeare



Even political satire got into trade cards, or something like them: in 1901 a New York company put out a folder (below) intended to disparage the Populist movement by showing that everything might be up to date in Kansas City, but the visiting farmers didn't know what to make of it.

Still Down on the Farm

In spite of the industrial revolution, most Americans still lived in rural surroundings at the end of the nineteenth century, and any randomly chosen stack of trade cards proved it. But even farm life was changing, notably through the steady improvement of agricultural machinery. It isn't quite clear whether the parrot or the girl is speaking, in the card shown below; but nobody was going to deny that the Jackson farm wagon was a very pretty thing. You had no tank to put a tiger in, but if you were well up on the rake's progress you got yourself a J. W. Stoddard Tiger-brand dump rake that turned haying into pure sport—just as a Syracuse chilled steel plow would sail through furrows like a gaff-rigged sloop. The Walter A. Wood Company, catering to a more sobersided set, stressed the safety lever that could instantly raise the cutting bar of their mower and lower the infant mortality rate on the farm.

Assumptions of a Simpler-minded Time

The public that the typical trade card aimed at was middle class, with middle-class dollars in its pocket and middle-class prejudices in its mind. Its emotions appear—from this evidence—elementary, its sensitivities minimal, its humor often appalling. Observe these stereotypes. Folk heroes, like the fireman, were impossibly courageous and cool. "Foreigners," on the other hand, were thought of as legitimate targets for ridicule, not necessarily bad-tempered but often unkind just the same. The German was fat and stupid, and would never learn to talk without an absurd accent; the Chinese were all laundrymen who had barely missed Mongolian idiocy; the Irish were ever ready for a shillelagh free-for-all. As for the Negro, he was a home-grown alien who was amusingly inferior but always good-natured—though the look on the face of the colored child in Fairy Soap's callous joke suggests that a minor race riot is about to begin. Today, despite echoes that still reverberate, it all seems curiously remote, an embarrassing expression of our national adolescence.